

Delving Into Those Donations

Editorial
June 10, 2003

SPOKESMEN FOR House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Tex.), Rep. Joe Barton (Tex.), Rep. W.J. "Billy" Tauzin (La.) and Sen. Richard C. Shelby (Ala.) steadfastly deny a connection between \$56,500 in campaign donations last year from executives of a Kansas-based energy company and the involvement of the four Republican lawmakers in legislation of keen interest to that company. We can understand why aides for the congressmen and senator would issue such denials. It is against the law for members of Congress to promise legislative favors in exchange for political donations. But executives of the firm, Westar Energy Inc., seem to have had a different take on their relationship with the legislators.

As Post writer Thomas B. Edsall reported last week, the Westar executives believed, as is evident from documents disclosed in a federal investigation of the company, that their donations to political groups linked with the four key Republicans would cause Congress to exempt their firm from a federal regulation they regarded as troublesome. Whether the campaign contributions were a quid pro quo for legislative action on a measure sought by Westar should not simply be a subject of debate between press secretaries and the media. Given the political game plan described by Westar executives and the subsequent legislative action that was taken, the matter warrants prompt investigation by the Department of Justice.

It may be easy to dismiss calls for such an investigation because the first requests for a probe came from prominent and highly partisan Democrats and from the consumer advocacy group Public Interest. But consider how this got started. It was Westar Vice President Douglas Lawrence who advised executives of the firm, in a company e-mail, that with respect to getting a provision they wanted in the energy bill last year, "We have a plan for participation to get a seat at the table, which has been approved by David [Wittig, then Westar's chief executive], the total package will be \$31,500 in hard money (individual), and \$25,000 in soft money (corporate)." Mr. Lawrence also wrote, "Right now, we have \$11,500 in immediate needs for a group of candidates associated with Tom DeLay, Billy Tauzin, Joe Barton and Senator Richard Shelby." Mr. Lawrence's e-mail said Mr. DeLay's "agreement is necessary before the House Conferees can push the language we have in place in the House bill." He said Mr. Tauzin and Mr. Barton "are key House Conferees on our legislation. They have made this request" for contributions to other Republican candidates "in lieu of contributions made to their own campaigns." With regard to Sen. Shelby, Mr. Lawrence wrote that the Alabama senator, "our anchor on the Senate side," had "made a substantial request of us for supporting" Tom Young, Sen. Shelby's chief of staff, who was running for a House seat from Alabama in 2002.

So last year 13 Westar officials coughed up \$31,500 in individual, or "hard money," contributions that went to selected Republican candidates. Westar gave \$25,000 in corporate "soft money" to the Texans for a Republican Majority PAC, a political committee with strong ties to Mr. DeLay, reports The Post's Tom Edsall. And what next? The provision sought by Westar was inserted in the energy bill last September by Rep. Barton. Democrats tried to strip the amendment out but lost in a party-line vote, with Mr. DeLay, Mr. Barton and Mr. Tauzin supporting the Westar amendment. Two weeks later, it was disclosed that a grand jury was investigating Westar. The provision was dropped from the bill.

The Justice Department can't let this matter drop.

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